

## TASLIMA NASRIN'S POETRY- IMAGES OF ENSLAVEMENT AND LIBERATION

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### ABSTRACT

This paper is a modest attempt to reinterpret Taslima Nasreen selected poems from her collection of poems 'All about Women'. This will help us to understand the situation of women in Bangladesh. Taslima Nasreen is appreciated as a feminist, a staunch fighter for women's rights, and against religious fundamentalism, which she holds responsible for the oppression of women in Bangladesh. Her courage in denouncing fundamentalism in her country is appreciated widely and Rushdie is among her admirers for her stance.

In order to appreciate her poems in the collection **All About Women**, it is necessary to understand the situation of women in Bangladesh. In her opinion, women live in a state of oppression in Bangladesh, and political freedom has not done much to alleviate it. Since 1975, the Islamic identity of Bangladesh has been emphasized and women's rights have been constantly violated. Women continue to be subordinate within the male-dominated state structure.

**KEYWORDS:** All about Women, Images, Enslavement, Liberation

### INTRODUCTION

**WORDS MEANING:** Meyebela- Girlhood, Lajja-Shame

When in 2002 Taslima Nasrin brought out her book *Meyebela* the intention of the author was to insert into Bengali literary discourse the concept of girlhood. *Meyebela* is a term created by Nasrin, which she uses to express girlhood. Bengali had in its lexicon a word for the lives and experiences of boys but no equivalent for girls. Since the book hit the shelves *Meyebela* as a term, has featured significantly within the region's discourses. Nasrin's promotion of her own gender was nothing new. Long before she published *Meyebela* she had anchored her intellectual life in the shark infested sea of women's rights.

Taslima Nasreen was born in Mymensingh, Bangladesh. In accordance with the wishes of her father, who was a doctor, she studied medicine. On completion of her education she worked as a gynaecologist in hospitals in Dhaka. While she was still a medical student she gained prominence as a feminist columnist and also published poetry and fiction.

In 1993, her novel *Lajja* was banned on the ground that its inflammatory tone excited tension between Muslims and Hindus. She was even accused of blasphemy and conspiracy against Islam and a reward was offered for her head. Forced to flee from Bangladesh, she sought asylum in Sweden. Later she lived in the United States. These days she lives as an exile in Kolkata.

While conservative elements in Bangladesh have demanded her execution, she has received significant awards for her work, for instance, the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought from the European Parliament (1994), the U. N. Educational, Social and Cultural Organisation's Tolerance and Non-violence Award (2001), and the UNESCO Mendajeet Singh Prize. Taslima Nasreen is appreciated as a feminist, a staunch fighter for women's rights, and against religious

fundamentalism, which she holds responsible for the oppression of women in Bangladesh. Her courage in denouncing fundamentalism in her country is appreciated widely and Rushdie is among her admirers for her stance.

In order to appreciate her poems in the collection **All About Women**, it is necessary to understand the situation of women in Bangladesh. In her opinion, women live in a state of oppression in Bangladesh, and political freedom has not done much to alleviate it. Since 1975, the Islamic identity of Bangladesh has been emphasized and women's rights have been constantly violated. Women continue to be subordinate within the male-dominated state structure.

As a columnist she doggedly returned to confront the oppression that sat heavily on the shoulders of women. She refused to let her readers retire for the night without leaving them a little something with which to disturb the tranquility of their dreams. Adeptly wielding the scalpel that peeled away society's mask she exposed the sorrow beneath the veil; every day women were the victims of rape, drug traffickers, acid attacks, dowry killings and other kinds of torture. The demand for her material was reflected in the spiralling rising sales of newspapers. 'Before me, women would write love stories or advice on childcare and cooking. I wrote something different.'

A widely regarded author she wrote numerous books, poems, short stories, and essays. By 1993 after the appearance of her book *Shame*, the Council of the Soldiers of Islam slapped a fatwa death sentence on her. 'Hundreds of thousands of fundamentalists went to the streets and demanded my death. They called a general strike,' which paralyzed Bangladesh.' Undeterred, the attitude with which she put it up to the obscurantist is to be gleaned from her challenge: 'I will continue my fight against all the evil forces without any compromise until my death.' Unlike Salman Rushdie she has steadfastly refused to apologise for giving offence to theocrats.

In response to the march of the mullahs the government then charged her with blasphemy and insisted she would be denied bail. Fearing that she would be murdered inside prison, human rights bodies and writers campaigned for other governments to shelter her. The European Union agreed and she fled to Sweden. The interim period was spent on the run. 'No political party came to my support except one or two small leftist parties.' This was in stark contrast to the attitude of the even smaller leftist sects in Britain and Ireland today who, it seems, would gladly kick her off the scaffold and into the eternity of nothingness.' When I first went into hiding, I took refuge in the home of total strangers. At that time, if I was found, the family would have been killed along with me, like Nazi Germany.

Ultimately her crime was to be inquisitive, to demand answers from those responsible for abominable crimes against women, to ask women themselves to reflect on their own oppression. I thought it was natural to ask "why". I don't understand why they accepted being beaten by their husbands, being prevented from going outside without permission, being forced to marry somebody and stopping their studies after marriage. I know that this is a very, difficult situation because if you divorce your husband and try to be independent, you'll be called "prostitute." But, you know, I don't care what people call me. Maybe that is the difference. If you want to be a human being, a good person, you first have to be bad in this society's eyes. If you're not willing to be "bad", you'll never be a truly strong and independent person.

It is this situation that Taslima Nasreen emerged as a radical feminist, taking up cudgels for the oppressed women of her country. She declared in an interview (2006): "If any religion allows the persecution of the people of different faiths, if any religion keeps women in slavery, if any religion keeps people in ignorance, then I can't accept that religion."

In an interview with the *Hindustan Times*, reported in August 22, 2006, she is reported as having said, "the Islam religion and their scriptures are out of place and out of time. It still follows the 7th Century laws and is hopeless. The need

of the hour is not reformation but revolution”.

In her view Islam oppresses women. What probably alienated her within society more than anything else was the link she made between the wretched conditions women were forced to endure and religion. She has vented astonishment that "seventh-century law" should rule any Muslim societies today.

Nasrin articulates a view of the Koran that sharply collides with the conventional wisdom in the West. Rather than it being the fundamentalists who read the Koran dishonestly, she claimed it was in fact the 'liberal' Muslims who are guilty of this:

They're not following Islam honestly. Fundamentalists  
are. They're following the "word of God," and the  
orders of Prophet Muhammad exactly. So it's not true  
that Islam is good for humanity. It's not at all good.  
Islam completely denies human rights and treats women  
very badly.

A confirmed secular humanist she takes grave exception to those Western intellectuals who promote the view that to demand separation of church from state is tantamount to Western colonization of Islamic culture. 'Some liberals always defend Islam and blame fundamentalists for creating problems. But Islam itself oppresses women. Islam itself doesn't permit democracy, and violates human rights: She argues that many Western intellectuals take the position that because the West is opposed to Islam then it is a radical position to support Islam and its culture. She sees this as very bad for the Islamic countries, which need to be secularized. 'I love my culture - my food, my music, my clothing - but I never, ever accept torture as being culture.' Here 'she is referring specifically to practices such as genital mutilation. Western donors' who give money for "cultural education," she contends, are financing madressas or religious schools which the churn out 'ignorant, foolish fundamentalists'.

She dismisses those who subscribe to the cultural relativism school as hoaxers. This tendency invariably finds ways to avoid giving full-blown support to extending the human rights currently enjoyed in the West to other societies on the grounds of cultural difference:

There can be no difference in the concept of human rights  
between the East and the West. If the veil is bad for the  
western women, then it is bad for their oriental sisters  
as well. If the patriarchy is to be fought against in the  
West, it should be equally fought against in the East ...  
in fact the fight is more urgent in the East, because most  
of the women have neither any education nor any  
economic independence. If modern secular education is

good for western women why should the eastern  
women be deprived of it?

Taslima Nasreen has been persecuted for her resolute defense of women's rights. She has taken considerable risks in a bid to make the world a better place for women. Like Rosa Parks before her she has taken with ferocious energy to the thankless task of rejecting the racist notion that there are second-class human beings. More voices like hers will need to step into the front line if women are no longer to be sent, apartheid style, to the back of the Mosque.

The condition of women in a society governed by a fundamentalist attitude forms the subject matter for her poems in the collection "All About Women".

This paper is a modest attempt to reinterpret Taslima Nasreen selected poems from her collection of poems 'All about Women'. This will help us to understand the situation of women in Bangladesh. In her opinion, 'Women live in a state of Oppression in Bangladesh and political freedom has not done much to alleviate it.

In the poem "Women", Nasrin generalizes that women are oppressed all over the world, both in and outside the home. In her country, religion allows their oppression. They are oppressed during all phases of life, no matter what qualities they might have. She reiterates at the end of the poem

.....She is always oppressed (60) as mentioned earlier, the poet believes that religion allows women to be exploited and deprived of their rights. This can be observed in the poem "We Women" in which she states:

Nature says women are human beings

Men have made religion to deny it.

Nature says women are human beings

Society has cooked a snook at it.

Nature says women are human beings

Men cry out No. (39)

While society claims to be developing and progressing the situation of women remains the same. The exploration and maltreatment exists at all levels. In the poem "At the Back of Progress", the employer is described thus:

SThe fellow goes home and beats his wife

Over a handkerchief

Or a short Collar (40)

The employee is no better.

Returning home he beats his wife

Over a bar of soap or the baby's pneumonia (40)

Here it seems that the poet seeks to draw attention to the common act of wife beating which seems to pervade the cross section of society in her country.

The crisis of womanhood and quest for identity/liberation are dominant preoccupations in her writings. Much of the gender specific crises of women seems to be not God-made but man-made and in a traditional country like Bangladesh. Society continues to be formidable force to contend with. In the patriarchal society of her country, women are regarded a commodity. They dress themselves, adorn themselves and use different hair styles and cosmetics just to please men.

In the poem 'The Commodity' the poet describes their life full of misery, where they are subjected to beating and maltreatment, and get killed in the dead of the night. Their beauty is exploited for commercial reasons to in advertisements 'Yet they smile on bill boards'.

Maltreatment of women distorts and damages the psyche of women. This damage is described with particular pathos in the poem 'The poem of Sakita'. Fear that her daughter would suffer throughout her life like herself, Sabita choses to kill her by throwing her down from the 6<sup>th</sup> floor. This instance of female infanticide is described thus:

.. for had the daughter lived for fifty years,  
 She would have suffered for fifty years.  
 Simply for being a woman.  
 Sabita, see, loves her daughter, more than she  
 Loves herself. She has written a beautiful poem.  
 Reducing her daughter's pain  
 From fifty years to fifth minutes.  
 Not killing her daughter,  
 But saving her.(4)

If women are sexually assaulted, the onus of bringing witnesses lies on women. If they are unable to produce witnesses society sees them as guilty. The assaulter manages to go sacrifice. The victim does not get any sympathy from the callous society including her family. In the poem 'Bad Omen', about a girl called Kalyani abducted and raped, Nasrin asks the rhetorical function

And if she loves and stands at the  
 Door of her house  
 With her wounded, bloody chewed-up  
 Torn and mangled body, will her  
 Grief-distracted mother lovingly touch  
 And nurse back to health her daughter's  
 Man-difiled form?

Women suffer exploitation in the sphere of wages too, as they are not paid as much as men or equal quantum of labour. This theme is described in the poem, "The Women Breaking Bricks"(18)

For breaking bricks the whole day she  
 Receives ten taka  
 Only twenty one, she looks forty plus.  
 Back home she has seven children  
 Besides her, a man under an Umbrella is  
 Breaking bricks.  
 He gets twenty taka a day  
 Double because he is a man (18)

Now the poem which I am going to discuss shows the pathetic condition of women before and after marriage. Subordination and economic exploitation women are embedded in patriarchal marital relationship. Apart from this marriage offers little security and stability and poet is critical of this state.

Thus we observe in the poem 'Female Goods', Nasreen mentions satirically the qualities of men seek in the woman they wish to marry. She should be fair skinned, tall, slim-wasted, firm and shapely figured, with long hair to the knees and should have pierced nose and ears. She should be a virgin shy and modest. Very modestly she should be good at cooking with all such qualities, the woman's lot is to be almost a slave to her husband and be his property.

This female can be used in any way as you like  
 If you wish, chain her feet, chain her hands  
 Put her mind in chains  
 And, if you wish, divorce her, saying talaq  
 three times

Lack of security in women's life may arise from the absence/inadequacy of dowry. The poem 'The Dowry' expresses the poignance of this aspect in Hindu society. Samiran Mandal sells his field's crops and his house for his daughters dowry but all this is not enough,

The bride is cursed everyday  
 Gets slaps and kicks'  
 Gets whipped,  
 The flowers in her garden wither and fall  
 And only thorns blossom there (8)

The bridegroom backs the bride to death because of her father's delay in giving the dowry.

In marriage, in Muslim society, a woman becomes a slave and a possession of her husband, totally under her control. He can spit in her face in contempt, beat her, wound her, and even kill her. Physical cruelty can be extreme, as described in the poem 'Happy Marriage'

Can go age out of my eyes if he wishes

And if he should wish, he can chain my feet

Use a Whip on me.(p21)

In the same poem, 'Happy Marriage' (21) poet describes ironically how a woman is expected to love her husband in spite of all maltreatment, because she is dependent on him for her subsistence. She is also expected to be completely faithful to him.

Not turning my eyes towards any other man

I will give proof of my chastity all my life (21)

In the poem, "Liberation" the poet indicates how religion is used cunning to suppress woman. Learned man, religious teachers promise paradise to women who serve their husband and because of this promise, 'they lick the dirt and dust off their husband's feet'. Ironically, the poet refers to religious teacher as 'learned man'.

They who framed such promises were learned man. In the same poem, 'A fighter for reform and the rights of women' Taslima proclaims:

The time has come to extinguish such myths

Too set such learned laws a fire.

And right the wrongs,

That pollutes our earthy paradise (8)

## CONCLUSIONS

I would like to conclude this paper by quoting her poem, "Sad Girl" in which, she advises a girl of sixteen to forget her sorrow and live with joy. "Dance in the whirlpool of light and air as you please". She would savour the joy of youth, far in later life she would have to accept and embrace much sorrow. She exhorts girls to be careful and show character. In the poem "Character". She tells girls to show character.

.....if you have,

You will keep on going as you are going now (53)

Thus we can say that how unsafe and vulnerable women are in the sub-continent. It is also clear that empowerment of women is needed not only in Bangladesh but also in all South-Asian countries. In an interview reported in The Hindustan Times, August 22, 2006, Nasreen said of her objective in writing: I don't go to the streets, instead I write and that is my way of protests." In her own words, 'I will continue my struggle for the emancipation of women. I want to create awareness among the women and make them stand up for their rights and economic independence.

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